Ship of Fools

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Keep them tightly bound, and keep them weak. These creatures are very fast and powerful...and they will be desperate. Received 1st place for Best Raphael Scene, 2nd place for Best New Story in 2006 Fanfic Comp, 1st place for Best Ongoing Story in 2007.

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Introduction
Prologue
Waking
Menagerie
The Communion of Souls
Master Eamon
The Want of a Nail

Prologue

" *I seek the essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood"*

Prologue

"Turn them over, please," the first man said.

At a signal from the second man, the creatures were rolled onto their backs, their limbs dropping heavily to the floor as their unconscious bodies settled into the new position. The first man moved closer to look them over more carefully. He could detect no aspect artifice or illusion about them. They seemed like real, natural creatures. Something inside him stirred ravenously. Every trader longed for an acquisition like this; none so far had ever procured one. But he kept his voice carefully even, his manner appraising. "May I ask how you acquired them? Second Earth is so tightly warded."

"Actually, they are native to this world," said the second man.

"Really?" The first man's carefully neutral expression broke just enough for his eyebrows to shoot up a little in surprise. "I didn't think there were such creatures in this world."

"As far as I know - and I know a good deal - there are only six of their kind in the entire world. You see before you two of them."

"Ah. If only six, then how…" the first man let his voice trail off, leaving the many obvious questions hanging in the air.

"They were once animals. They were exposed to a –" the second man searched for a word that the other's unsophisticated mind could comprehend, "a potion, which gave them human characteristics."

"A potion," the first man repeated flatly, not bothering to hide his skepticism. His mind automatically began to look for a catch. He

could think of no reason why the other would try to swindle him, yet still…A lifetime of being only as honest as his fortunes allowed him to be, and fortune had not always favored him, had made him watchful for dishonesty in others. He gave a gentle, patronizing smile. "I know of no potion even in my own world that could change an animal into this. I wonder how someone from this world, with it's…er…limited understanding of sorcery…could accomplish it."

The second man's voice was scrupulously polite, but his eyes turned as cold as a grave. "You are correct, it was not actually a potion. It was substance called a mutagen, a matter of science in my world. I merely used the word 'potion' to accommodate your… er…limited understanding of technology."

There was silence for a moment as they gazed at each other, each man quickly running through the various methods he could use to break the other's arrogance. If only they each weren't so profitable for the other. The first man suddenly smiled again, magnanimous, conciliatory. "Ah, well, what does it matter? I can tell my clients they came from Second Earth for simplicity's sake, and none will be the wiser."

"Then I take it you're interested in their purchase?"

Interested? He coveted them like a man would covet another's lover. The price for exotics like this would no doubt be high, but they would be worth a small fortune in his world. He only hoped he had brought enough currency to settle the deal today. "Well," he said, pretending to think it over, "if we can settle on a price, I'll take them both."

The second man bowed slightly. "You have always been a most exemplary client, I will give you an exceptionally fair price."

"You are most kind," said the first man, returning the bow. "If they can be prepared for shipping, I'll take them off your hands when I depart."

"As you wish. Come to my office and we can settle the details." The second man paused for a moment before leaving the room, as if debating whether or not to say something. "A word of advice," he said at last. "Keep them tightly bound, and keep them weak. These creatures are fast and powerful, and they have near human intelligence…and they will be desperate." He paused again, looking them over thoughtfully. Then he added, "The one in red is especially vicious."

Waking

I usually write at a snail's pace, so I figure it's better to post shorter chapters more frequently than longer chapters that take forever. Anyway, Raph's awake, so the language gets a little salty.

Don't own the turtles. Make no money. I forgot to say that before.

Chapter 1 - Waking

Raphael

The first thing I became aware of was the weird dream I was having. I was floating in darkness, only at the same time I was the darkness. And there was this wave action going on, rocking me up and down with stomach retching nausea that climbed to a crescendo of queasiness at the top of each swell, then receded a little. And at the same time I was also the wave and the queasiness. I was at the center of this whole universe of nausea and the universe was me. Then something shifted, and I was suddenly tiny and standing at he edge of my own throat, which looked to me like the precipice of a volcano. I stared down the shaft of my volcano/throat, watching my own stomach flowing and ebbing, forcing its way farther up my throat with sickening persistence at each roiling swell. The gray membrane bubbling up in my direction looked taught to the point of exploding, and I knew there would be some serious putrid shit spewing all over the place if that thing ever burst. I couldn't let that happen, but I wondered how the hell I was going to get all that shit back down where it belonged.

I gradually realized that it wasn't just a dream. My stomach really was heaving, and I was about as sick as I had ever been in my life.

As I got more awake smells began to hit me - of human body odor. A smell like stale, old corn chips crushed under dirty, fungus infected

feet, rancid vinegar, musk grown overpowering and gag inducing from lack of washing, shit and piss. I thought maybe I had been thrown into an alley among a particularly foul smelling pack of homeless. The stench led to an awareness of a violent pain in my head, and the combination of not exactly pleasant sensations became too much.

I tried to roll over as my stomach finally went over the top and tried to heave all of my guts onto the floor. That's when I found out I was chained, my wrists behind my back and my ankles together. That really got my attention. I struggled to get up, get to my knees while my stomach struggled to find something to purge from itself. In reality, it was pretty empty. A thin stream of liquid, mostly acid, burned its way up my throat and out my mouth. There wasn't enough of it to splatter, so it dangled peevishly from my lower lip in a syrupy stream. I spat and shook my head between the dry heaves, trying to sever the lines of saliva and stomach acid dangling from my mouth.

I had no idea what he hell had happened to me. I had no idea who nailed me, or how, or where the hell I was. Where was…? Mikey. He had been with me. What happened to him? That thought was enough to make me knock off the bullshit and pull myself together and focus. I gave up trying to get the streams of acidic spit to let go of my lip, and just turned my head and wiped my mouth against my shoulder. I took several deep breaths and forced my stomach by a sheer act of will to stay the fuck in place, because it wasn't going to get any more out of me.

I looked around and took stock of my situation. The first thing I noticed was Mike's body, face down on the floor, across the room from me. He was bound like I was, with his hands shackled behind his shell and his feet shackled together. A chain ran from his bound feet to an iron ring bolted to the floor, like mine. I called his name a few times to no response. I told myself he was still alive but unconscious. No one would bother to chain him up like that if he were dead. Even so, I didn't look away from him until I was sure I could see his shell rising and falling slightly with his breathing.

We were in a big rectangular room made entirely of wood, it looked like. Wooden planks for the floor, walls and ceiling. The only light came from a square hole cut into center of the ceiling, fitted with an iron latticework and open to the sky. What I could see of the sky looked gray and overcast. In any case, it wasn't letting in much light. Beyond the stink of whoever the hell else was rooming here with me and Mike, I could smell salt water. I suddenly realized that it wasn't just my stomach that was rocking me with nausea, but the whole room was slowly rolling up and down. I never been on a boat before, but it was pretty clear we were in the cargo hold of a ship at sea.

I starting checking out the rest of the cargo. There were maybe seven or eight of us all together, counting Mike and me. Mike was in a corner, wall on one side, and a scrap heap of a woman on the other. She didn't have a stitch on, and she was shackled only at one ankle, with a chain and ring of her own bolted to the floor. She was chained far enough away from Mike that they were out of each other's reach. We were all bolted down a good distance apart from one another. The woman was moaning, and in fact, had been moaning this whole time, a soft, steady whine as measured and regular as the ticking of a clock. Moan for four point five seconds, stop, take a breath, moan for four point five seconds, stop, take a breath, over and over. I could already tell that it was quickly gonna get on my nerves. She was sitting up, but I couldn't really tell if she was fully conscious or not. Something was definitely off about her, out of it.

I had the corner across from Mike and to my right – Oh fuck …oh holy fucking shit…I was looking at a human being, but a human being so messed up I almost gagged again. He looked like that guy from that movie, The Elephant Man, he had Elephant Man's disease, Don would know what it's really called. The right half of his body was fairly normal, but the left half was deformed is so many ways I couldn't even begin to take it all in. The misshapen half of his head was huge, like someone had pulled back his skin and shoved rocks the size of grapefruits under there, piling them on in all directions and fusing them to his skull. That was just the bone structure. The

thick, sickly grayish skin grew rabidly in lumps and folds all over the deformed half of his hairless head and face. One of the growths actually started from somewhere inside his mouth, protruding past his teeth and coming out the corner of his lips like a fat, tumorous cigar. He couldn't get that side of his mouth closed because of it.

The deformities went on down the side of his body. The left sleeve of some kind of tunic he was wearing was cut off. His left arm, impossibly thick and gnarled, ended in a hand five or six times the size of his other one, his useless fingers each the size of cucumbers. His left leg, that side of he pants also cut off, was the same way, massive and disfigured. There was nothing that looked like a foot in evidence, just a big clump of dense, rank flesh at the end of his leg.

Looking at him, the first thing that came to me – completely irrelevant to the situation but it was all I could think of – was *damn, you know this poor fucker ain't never gonna get laid in his life.* I may be a freak myself, but I'm doing better than that. One of his eyes was completely obscured by a big fold of lumpy, cauliflower like skin growing out of his huge forehead and drooping down his face, but the other eye, looking back at me, was perfectly human, sane, and rational.

"Hey, Freakboy," he greeted me. His voice was slurred from that - growth – coming out of his mouth but, all things considered, his tone was pretty amiable. "Welcome to the Ship of Fools."

Menagerie

Author's note: It's been a while since I updated. It turns out my muse is a lazy, recalcitrant bitch, and I finally had to kick her to the curb and struggle along with out her.

I didn't have to search my imagination for the Ship of Fools. It's an unpleasant historical fact. In coastal areas in the Middle Ages, "ships of fools" occasionally docked to take on the insane, the infirm, and other "undesirables", who were sold to the ships crews by townspeople. These vessels were traveling prisons and circuses, simultaneously providing a way to cleanse a town of unwanted or troublesome citizens (mad or not) while providing the public with a twisted form of entertainment. Anyway, enough with the history stuff. I haven't sent the turtles back in time to the Middle Ages, I just borrowed the idea.

Chapter 2 – Menagerie

Michaelangelo

There isn't a worse feeling in the world than waking up to yourself hung over and vomiting.

I remember the year we turned eighteen, which Raph had concluded was close enough to the legal drinking age in the state of New York, and he decided to celebrate the event by getting me completely wasted. Now, it wasn't the first time I'd ever had a drink - or a few - but Raph by that point in our lives was already a connoisseur in the art of getting tanked. It was just him and me in the lair - for a wonder even Master Splinter was out - and Raph produced a saltshaker, half a dozen lemons, a liter of Cuervo Gold for each of us, and taught me how to do tequila shots.

Despite tequila's reputation as a serious hardcore alcohol and not for relative beginners, I found that the shots went down pretty easily,

especially after three or four. I was just congratulating myself on my newly discovered innate ability to handle hard liquor…and that's the last thing I remember clearly. I think there was a period of time where I found everything absolutely hilarious, and then sometime later there may have been a fight of some kind, and later still I might have actually told Raph that I love him, but I can't be sure.

The next thing I knew I was lying in the bathroom with my forehead pressed against the hard, cool, comforting presence of the toilet, and Donny was with me, trying to get me up. I really didn't want to leave. My stomach was roiling menacingly, and I knew I'd have to throw up again soon. And the cold porcelain felt so soothing against my aching head. I loved my precious toilet bowl. Such a useful and friendly device.

"Come on, Mikey," Don said gently. "It's ok. Let's get you to bed."

"Noooaw ahm mum mum," I said, or something like that.

I heard Leo's voice in the living room, bellowing, *bellowing* at Raph, and going on about irresponsibility and alcohol poisoning and how he could have killed me. If Raph was in the same state as I was, he was in no condition to fight back or comprehend a lecture, but that wasn't the point. The point was that even from a distance away Leo's shouts were battering against my skull like a pile driver. I couldn't imagine what they were doing to Raph, who was receiving the blast at point blank range. Leo has a little sadistic streak in him that he likes to trot out every now and then when he feels justified.

Don eventually got me arm over his shoulders and hauled me up, working me out the door and towards my room. The forced movement was too much.

"Uhhungh, Don, I'm gonna-" I gasped, right before I did. Don held my forehead as I bent over and heaved.

"Don't worry, it's ok," he said, his voice sounding unnecessarily chipper to me ear. "Everybody throws up. I throw up, too,

sometimes. And sometimes its yellow, and sometimes it's brownish, and sometimes there's little peas in it…"

I groaned in agony and some more came up. Speaking of sadistic brothers, Donny was very inappropriately making a mockery of my suffering. And Don's supposed to be the good one.

In the living room, Splinter finally cut off Leo's tirade, announcing that we would deal with it in the morning. That he let Leo go on for as long as he did was a good indication that he was pretty ticked off, too.

I felt better back then than I did now.

As consciousness gradually seeped its way back into my brain, I at first thought that Raph and I had spent another night like our eighteenth birthday, passing the time getting fraternally hammered together. But then I realized I could hardly move, which led to the realization that I was chained hand and foot, and that something must have gone horribly wrong.

I started struggling, the few portions of my mind that had decided to wake up and start functioning all shifting gears at once and flying into a pure panic. And still my body could not stop trying to throw up even as I fought my bonds like a wild dog.

"Mike…hey, Mikey… *Mike!* "

"Raphie?" It was a nickname I almost never used anymore, not in any seriousness, anyway, only when I felt like irking him. But it slipped out of me now in a plaintive plea because I was suddenly six years old again, and I felt awful, and I was scared shitless, and I wanted my bigger, badder brother with me.

"Yeah, Mike. I'm right here. Calm down." His voice, rough as gravel and potholes (like always), strong and full of fight (again like always), intimidates the hell out of most people (aside from the type of woman who finds it sexy - there's no accounting for taste in some people).

For me, it has always been a comfort. I always feel safer when I'm in earshot of that voice. I made myself stop struggling and just rode out the vomiting festival in my stomach until it wound down. Then I took several slow, deep breaths.

"Ok, you with us now?" Raph asked, more gently than his usual tone.

"Yeah." I spat a few times, trying to work the bile out of my mouth. I opened my eyes to see Raph across from me, chained and stripped of mask, pads, and weapons like I was. Then I quickly shut them again, trying to adjust to the stench and rolling motion of wherever this was before adding visuals to the mix. "Yeah, I'm alright. Feel like shit, though."

"Me, too," he said. "Must be from whatever drug they gave us."

"Damn," I mumbled. "What the hell happened?"

"I don't know, Mike. Whoever the fuck it was, I didn't see them. Did you see anything?"

I shook my head. "I just saw you get shot. Some kind of dart went in you. That's the last thing I remember. Then I must have got hit, too." I ran through the usual suspects in my head. "You think Shredder?"

"I said don't know. I didn't see any foot or anyone else, for that matter."

"Bishop?"

Raph considered it a moment. "Not his style, he'd be here dissecting us."

"Somebody new, maybe?" I persisted.

"I really don't know."

"Had to be Saki."

"Give it a rest, Mike!" he snapped. "It doesn't matter right now. It ain't gonna fucking help us get out of here!"

I tried twisting my hands in their manacles. The tight fit was starting to cut off my circulation. "Uh, speaking of which, where the hell are we?" I asked.

"Well, my new friend here says we're on some kind of slave ship. And we ain't in our own world no more."

"What the hell! How –" My eyes snapped open and my words cut off as I got a load of Raph's new "friend". "Oh." I gaped at him, my jaw dropping open. He looked like half his body had exploded or something inside his skin.

"Hello," said Raph's new friend.

"He's an eyeful at first, isn't he?" Raph commented.

"Oh, uh, sorry," I said, suddenly realizing I was being incredibly rude. "Didn't mean to stare at you."

"It's all right," he answered. His voice, working around the deformities that slurred his speech, was calm and intelligent, even cultured, the kind of guy who I could imagine called his friends "old chap" and went to the symphony because he actually liked it. "One gets used to it."

Yeah, I thought, tell me about it. I've been getting used to it my whole life.

"Actually, this isn't technically a slave ship," he informed. " We're on a Ship of Fools." Raph and I looked at each other, uncomprehending, and back at him. "A Ship of Fools," he repeated as if we should know what the hell he was talking about. Still getting blank looks from Raph and me, he went on to explain. "We were each purchased to be part of a – " he paused and search for a word – "a menagerie of sorts. I am a curiosity because of my appearance,

obviously. As are the two of you. There are none like you in this world. And the rest here are quite mad, which many find – interesting – for lack of a better word. We are playthings for the owners, and also, for an admission fee, visitors will come on board and - and view us, among other things."

Raph's expression was as incredulous as mine felt. "Are you fucking kidding me with this?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid I'm not. Of course, it's illegal in many parts of the world, but quite a popular…entertainment…in others." He glanced back and forth between us. "There is nothing like this in your world?"

"No!" "Fuck, no!" we said in unison.

He lowered his eyes to the floor, murmuring more to himself than to us. "Second earth must indeed be a marvel, then."

"I don't know nothing about no second earth or whatever," Raph said. "Far as I know there's just earth. That's it."

"Well, there are many earths, many worlds," Raph's new friend started to explain. This guy reminded me a little of Don, always ready with the helpful information, and usually ending up telling you more than was actually helpful. "This is first earth. Second earth is –"

"Hey," I interrupted as a light bulb went off in my head. "He must mean Usagi's world. Remember at the Battle Nexus? They announced Usagi and Gen as being from second earth. We were third earth."

"You know of the Nexus?" he asked excitedly. "Then you should know of first earth. The first among all worlds, with apprehension of all that came after. The wellspring of magic across all realities. Old before the Nexus was made." There was actually a note of pride in his voice, as if, despite the fact that he was chained in the filthy hold of some kind of floating freak show, he was gratified to be a part of this place.

"Uh, sorry," I said. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"You know, I hate to tell you this," Raph informed him "but so far your world sucks."

"Ah, yes, forgive me," he said ruefully. "I realize you haven't had a very hospitable introduction." He sighed. "At least be assured that it's not all like this…. Er, so, there are creatures – forgive me – people like you on third earth as well? I hadn't heard of that."

"Yeah," said Raph. "But it's a long story, and none of it matters. It ain't gonna help us get out of here. So, buddy – what's your name, anyway?"

"Polyp." He paused with a troubled, confused look on his face. "No… no…it's not Polyp." I began to wonder if he wasn't a little cracked in the head himself. "It's Newlin," he said after a moment. "Newlin…the other comes easier nowadays. Hold onto your name here, lad. It will be the last thing left to you. All that remains"

"Yeah, fine," Raph said, with an unspoken "whatever" hovering in the background. "So Newlin, you know how many men they got running this ship?"

"About twenty, I think. We are a relatively small vessel. Though I have heard of ships carrying menageries of fifty or more. I believe we are more of a hobby than a means of business for our particular masters."

"Twenty," said Raph. "We can take twenty easy, Mike."

Polyp/Newlin eyed him skeptically. "Chained to the floor?"

"Pfft. This ain't gonna last."

"Ooooooooh." A woman's moan suddenly broke into the conversation, startling me. Except for the occasional shuffling, and the soft but consistent noises from the guy in the farthest corner of

the hold from me (and judging from those sounds, I didn't want to know what he was doing with himself over there), the other captives had so far been pretty quiet. "Ooooooooh."

"Aw god," Raph muttered. "There she goes again."

I turned to the moaning woman. She was sitting on an old, cruddy blanket, one of her ankles shackled to the floor about a body's length away from me. "Miss?" I said. "Miss, are you ok?" I knew it was a stupid question. A stark naked, probably insane woman chained up in filth and stench is obviously not going to be ok. I got another moan in reply.

"She is called Finch," Newlin supplied helpfully, "though I am sure it's not her real name"

"Hey, Finch? Miss, are you hurt somewhere?" Again the drawn out, distressed sound.

"She's not injured," said Newlin. "She just does that all the time. You'll get used to it."

I bit back a sarcastic reply, and called her again. I didn't want to get used to it. I wanted to get her attention and somehow snap her out of it. After I called her a few more times she abruptly switched herself off, and slowly dragged her focus away from whatever horror show was going on inside her head and onto me. I carefully looked nowhere but straight in her eyes, with a half formed notion that I could win her confidence if I didn't gawk at her naked body. Her eyes were very round, and pale blue. Her skin was also very pale, with lips set in a thin, fragile line, her features small and on the refined side. She might have been a pretty girl, in a delicate houseplant kind of way, if she wasn't covered in grime and about five pounds away from being completely anorexic. Her matted hair, which might have been blonde, was the color of ashes and dirt.

She regarded me a moment, her expression a impossible combination of totally vacant and intently burning, then her mouth

stretched over her teeth in some semblance of a smile and she crooned at me in a bizarre, sing-songy voice. "Heeeeeey, sweeetnesss."

A door at the far side of the hold suddenly burst open, and two men came in carrying wooden bowls and a large pot. "Hey, Freakies," one of them yelled boisterously. "Time fore eats!" He pulled up short, his face twisting in disgust. "Agh, Fluke!" he said to the guy sitting closest to the door – the one who had been making all the suspiciously revolting noises. "What the hell you do again, huh, huh?"

Finch curled in to a ball and hid herself under the blanket.

"Gods, it's everywhere," said the second guy. "I'm not cleaning him this time."

"Feh, you will if you're ordered to," returned the first guy.

"Then I'll wait 'till I'm ordered. Let him sit in his own shit 'till then." Grumbling, he ladled something from the pot into one of the bowls and thumped it unceremoniously on the floor next to the one called Fluke. "There's your damn soup. Choke on it."

As they moved on to the next captive, he muttered. "Wish we could get rid of that one."

"You know," said the first guy in a conspiratorial stage whisper, "I'm thinking a terrible accident might befall him sometime soon."

The second guy stopped and turned to him, raising his eyebrows in mock surprise. "You think?"

"Indeed I do, with a bit of planning."

"Be a tragedy, that," said the second guy.

The first guy snickered. "Horrible."

They continued their idea of banter as they fed the next two, deliberately spilling some of the pot on one, apparently to see if they could get a reaction (they couldn't), and sarcastically addressing the other as "my lord." They were comparatively kind when they got to Newlin, the first guy helping him balance the bowl in his one serviceable hand while the other ladled the soup.

"There you go, Polyp," said the first guy, patting him roughly on the shoulder. "You got it by yourself?"

"Yes, I am fine."

"All right, let's do Finchy now." They went over to her and dragged the blanket off. "Come on, Finchy-bird, time for eats." She didn't move. The first guy let out an exasperated sigh. "Come on, sweetness."

Finch started moaning again in protest, but they grabbed her by either stick thin arm and hauled her upright. The second guy produced a funnel and forced the narrow end between her teeth. Evidently Finch wasn't big on eating. I couldn't blame her much. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the sort of games she must be used for in a place like this - enough to throw anyone off her feed.

Working together, they clamped her mouth shut and pinched her nose closed while they slowly ladled the soup in the funnel, forcing her to swallow most of it as she sputtered and coughed. They casually groped her whenever they had a free hand to spare. They did it almost indifferently, without thinking about it, as if it were more out of habit than any real interest.

"Hey," I said. " *Hey!* Leave her alone!" They ignored me. Across from me, I heard Raph's quiet snarl.

" *Leave her the fuck alone, I said!"*

This time they looked over at me, but their hands didn't stop roaming. And Finch didn't stop moaning, a futile, automatic protest

that didn't even hold meaning to her anymore, much less her tormentors. "Heh, turtle man's jealous," said the first guy.

"Aw, you want a piece of Finchy here?" said the second guy. "Be patient, you might get your chance. Everyone else has. Even poor Polyp over there, but he wouldn't take it. Ain't that right Polyp?"

"He's a shy boy, ain't you Polyp?" chortled the first guy, as his hands squeezed and pinched.

I jerked at my chains, too angry to care that the gesture was useless. "Fucking sons of bitches."

Finished with the force feeding, they released Finch, letting her drop to her blanket without another glance. "What do we do with these two?" Asked the second guy, indicating Raph and me.

"Orders are not to untie 'em. Gotta feed 'em like Finchy."

"Damn. Why don't we just not feed 'em?"

"Nah, we can't. They're the fancy new toys. They gotta arrive in good shape."

"Well, let's do that one last," said the second guy, pointing at me. "You know it's gonna make trouble." And with that they crossed over to Raph.

After a single snarl at the sight of what those guys were doing with Finch, Raph had fallen silent, and watched. He was now sitting absolutely, deceptively still, his eyes fixed on the floor as if he never intended to move again. I knew he was about to do something that, considering our circumstances, was going to be rash and ill advised. After twenty two years of dealing with himself, Raph's temper had grown no less potent than it had been when he was in his teens. But when he had to, he could hold it in check, and bide his time. I could sense his tightly coiled fury from across the room. I could *feel* it wash over me, like a wave of heat blasting from an open oven. There are

few things I've ever seen more ominous than Raphael with deadly intent, waiting for his moment to strike. I couldn't believe the fools approaching him were too clueless to sense it.

He sat with his feet close to the ring bolted into the floor, giving himself about a foot and a half of slack chain between the ring and his feet. As the first guy went around behind him to seize his head and the second guy leaned in front of him with the funnel, he suddenly moved like a cobra. He whipped his head back, smashing his skull into the face of the first guy, and jerked his knees up, pulling the chain taught and hitting the second guy in the back of his legs with his knees, tumbling him forward within range of his teeth. With a growl of pure malice, Raph buried his teeth in the second guy's neck.

And they thought I was going to be trouble.

The man screamed in agony and flailed about, beating ineffectively at Raph's head with his fists. Raph only clamped down harder, his teeth nearly meeting as they bit through skin and flesh. The first guy was screaming, too, blood running from his nose and lip from Raph's skull bashing them. He picked up the heavy soup pot and struck him hard in the head, trying to force him to let go. Pandemonium had broken out in the hold. All around me voices shouted and howled, as my fellow captives broke free of their respective stupors and joined in the din, agitated as a shaken wasps nest. I heard my own voice shouting in accompaniment.

Unable to make Raph release his hold on the second guy's neck, the first guy pulled a dagger from his belt and started frantically stabbing him. Down into the shoulder, his arm, his sides.

"No!" I screamed, as if it would have any effect. " Raph!" I threw myself against the chains, struggling vainly to break them, to crawl across the floor and help my brother, with my own teeth if I had to. " *Raph!* "

"What the hell is going on down here?" A new voice, hard and ruthless, a voice with authority, broke in to the chaos. "Vale! Get off

him! Leave off, *now* !" The newcomer, with several other men behind him, strode quickly across the hold and seized the first guy's wrist a split second before he was about to slit Raph's throat, and threw him violently against the wall. The new guy – I guessed he had to be the captain – bent over Raph, inspecting his wounds. He had fallen over on his side, his breathing hoarse and shallow, his blood running in thick streams across the floorboards towards me. But his eyes were open and conscious, if just barely, and fixed on mine. "Stay with us, bro," I whispered. He returned my gaze but didn't reply. He didn't seem to have the energy to spare. I couldn't look away.

"What the hell d'you think the mistress will do to you when she sees this, eh?" the captain thundered at Vale.

"But sir," he protested, "look what it did to Kearn!" Yeah, old Kearn wasn't doing too good, motionless on the floor near Raph with his neck half torn open.

"You think she cares?" the captain shot back. "This thing's life cost more than this entire goddamn ship and every man on it."

"Give me your shirts – all of you - now! Pack 'em in the wounds. You," he ordered another of the men. "Go get Tully and tell 'im to bring the thread and bandages… And someone look after Kearn." He added the last part almost as an afterthought.

"We're still a days' sail from the master and mistress," the captain snarled to Vale. "For all our sakes, you better pray it survives."

The Communion of Souls

Special thanks to Kyabetsu for all the advice on injuries and internal bleeding and cauterization all that other nasty stuff.

Chapter 3 – The Communion of Souls

Michaelangelo

I made a bargain with myself. Or maybe it was with fate, or the universe, or whatever gods might happen to be out there. Raph would live as long as I didn't look away. The powers that be wouldn't have the nerve to stop his heart, not while I was looking straight at him. A ridiculous notion, I know. I have no magic power in me to hold death at bay, and as far as I've ever seen there's no power in the cosmos that picks and chooses who lives and dies. If there is a god out there, he doesn't play favorites.

But still, unable to do anything else to help my brother, keeping a constant vigilance made me feel like I was doing *something* , even if it did nothing to help Raph in the end, and little to reassure myself.

The guy Raph had taken by the throat was dead, and several crewmen had removed his body from the hold. The guy Vale, who had stabbed Raph, went with them, still angry over his dead buddy, but also trembling over his own possible fate, shaken with the threat of what this "mistress" person might do to him. Raph clung stubbornly to consciousness while several crewmen tended to his injuries. Threatened with the wrath of "the master and mistress," they made a fairly sincere effort.

"So what news, Tully?" the captain demanded. "Can you save it?"

"Don't know, sir, I never had to treat a damn turtle-man before. I can't sew up the stabs, they're too deep." He turned abruptly to me. "You, the other freakboy. Your bodies' like a regular man's on the inside?"

"Yeah, I guess, mostly," I said. I never really thought about it before. Don would know this stuff. "Yeah, it's the same."

"It's got a deep stab wound where the shell meets the back, about half way down," Tully said. "What about that?"

"Uh…" I was starting to realize I was sadly deficient in knowledge about my own anatomy.

"Come on!" he shouted impatiently. "What's there? Any major organs? Lungs, liver, what?"

"Just muscle, I think, if it's where the shell is," I said. "Blood vessels. Uh, ligaments? I think that's it." It was my best guess anyway.

Tully turned back to the captain with an expression that said he found me pretty much useless. "Sir, I can try to cauterize the stabs, but if the blade hit any vital organs that ain't gonna save it. It'll be a lot of work for nothing. I don't even know how much blood these things are supposed to have. It might have lost too much already."

The captain looked Raph over, considering. "If it were up to me, Tully," he said after a moment, "I'd just as soon let it die. But then it'll be all our necks. Do what you can."

"Yes, sir. You two," Tully ordered, pointing. "Go to the galley, get some knives, or use a spatula handle, anything long and metal. Heat 'em up and run back here with 'em. And I mean *run.* I need 'em red hot. The rest of you keep hard pressure on the wounds. Hard! You're doing it like little girls. It's got blood coming out everywhere." He snatched a compress from one of the men and demonstrated how he wanted it done, then he raised his eyes to the captain. "Captain Lawler," he said, "you'll tell the mistress this had nothing to do with me? I tried my damnedest to save it?"

"I'll tell her that for all of us," Lawler replied. "Not that it'll matter if it dies. You know she hates to have the expensive ones damaged."

"Unless she's doing the damage herself."

The captain snorted humorlessly, watching Raph. "You'll probably wish you were dead, freakboy, once she gets a hold of you," he said. "Glad I'll be of it, too."

"Fuck you, too, asshole." His voice was low and rasping with pain, but his eyes glared pure defiance back at Lawler.

Without any change in his expression, the captain pushed the man who was putting pressure on the gash in Raph's arm out of the way and nonchalantly dug his fingers into the open wound. Gripping hard, he ground his nails into the lacerated flesh. Raph let out a long, strangled groan of pain, and Lawler released him, casually wiping the blood off his hand on another man's shirt. "Watch your mouth with me."

" *Fuck you,"* Raph replied. Yeah, I should have known that was coming next. Wait for Raph to give in and holler "uncle" and you're going to be waiting the rest of your life. The attack seemed to rally him. His voice was actually stronger than it has been moments before, and by his expression he was more than ready to try out his teeth on Lawler's throat, now.

"Raph," I said, jumping in before he got into a fight he couldn't win. "Screw him. Save your strength."

"Beseech your pardon, captain," said Tully. "But let's get this thing alive to the masters first. It's in no shape to take a beating right now."

Tully's words probably had a stronger affect on Lawler than mine did on Raph. The captain nodded curtly. "Keep me informed of its condition," he said, and left the hold, striding carelessly through the wide puddle of blood slowly spreading its way across the floor.

I decided to try my luck with Tully. Out of all the crew we had seen so far, he seemed to be the only one who could possibly be an ally. At the very least, he hadn't shown any interest in torturing us. "Hey.

Hey, Tully, is it?" I said. "You think you could let me over there? I just want to help him."

He glanced briefly at me. "Ain't nothing you can do to help him," he muttered.

"Look, I promise I won't try anything. You don't even have to untie me. Just move me over there so I can sit with him."

"You can sit with him from over there," he replied indifferently.

"At least untie him so he'll be more comfortable," I tried again.

"So he can catch a second wind and tear my throat out?"

" *Please."*

"Mikey." Raph's low, quiet voice snapped my attention back to him. "No."

My brothers and I have trained so much together, fought so often together side by side, that we don't always need a lot of words to communicate. There's times when we can carry out whole dialogues with just glances. I could interpret everything he meant from his one "no." *Don't ever beg these bastards. Don't lower yourself. Don't give them the satisfaction.* So much for making an ally out of Tully.

"How you doing?" I asked him, attempting – I don't know – some sort of dry irony or something.

"Fuck'n peachy."

The men returned with the red hot steel to cauterize Raph's wounds. They sat on him as they worked to keep him still. I personally know that Raph has an incredibly high pain tolerance, but now he roared and his body instinctively began to struggle violently as the heated metal seared his flesh, once, twice, three times. The cauterization stopped further bleeding, but what with the extreme pain and all the blood he had already lost, Raphael had fallen unconscious by the

time they were finished. The stink of burnt meat wafted through the hold, adding to the already sickening stench of the room.

"That's it," Tully said, straightening. "It'll either last the day now or it won't. Nothing more I can do." One of the men threw a rough blanket over Raph and they left the hold.

"Try not to worry, lad." Newlin's sudden voice startled me. I had all but forgotten there were other people down here. "He'll be all right. The mistress will be onboard by nightfall. She can heal him, she's a powerful sorcerer."

I nodded in acknowledgement of his words without any of the specifics really registering. Only that help would come by nightfall. Whether it was sorcerers or the Mayo Clinic, it didn't matter to me, as long as whatever it was could save Raph.

The day passed with agonizing slowness, but for once in my life I was too worried to be bored. Every now and then a crewman came down to see if Raph was still alive. At some point they brought us more food, leaving a pile of some kind of hard bread and dried meat for me to eat off the floor like a dog, which I ignored. Occasionally my fellow prisoners made some noise: moans, exclamations, brief fractured conversations and arguments, bursts of nonsense ranting. I paid no attention to any of it. I kept my vigil over Raph, marking every breath and slight movement. He didn't regain consciousness, though at times he grimaced and groaned in pain. After several hours passed it began to seem like this had always been my whole life, me watching over Raph with anxiety clawing at my stomach.

Considering the lives we lead, we all know the odds of all of us living to a ripe old age. But I've never been able to imagine living without one of my bros. It's not something I ever dwell on, at least not while I'm awake. Sometimes the things I refuse to think about during the day grab a hold of me at night when I'm not looking and rattle me with bad dreams. Now I was painfully awake and caught in the middle of an endlessly looping nightmare. I silently begging him to

hold on, and I'll admit not just out of love but also, selfishly and like a coward, because I was simply afraid of being left alone in that place.

Raph got worse as time went on. He grew pale - a sickly shade of mint green - and started shivering under the blanket, a cold sweat breaking out on his face at the same time. He mumbled to himself; I couldn't make out any of the words except "damn" and "thirsty." I tried speaking to him then, telling it would just be a couple of more hours. At least I hoped it wouldn't be any more than that. But he didn't answer me, and eventually lapsed back into silence.

The sky above the hatch gradually turned dark, and at last Tully came down to check on Raph once more, and announced before leaving that we were finally pulling into port. A huge wave of relief washed over me. "Ok, bro, you hear that?" I said. "We're here. We'll get you fixed up." I expected someone to come right away, but it turned out we were forced into the waiting game again. The minutes stretched on into a half an hour, and still no "mistress" with some kind of magical healing power showed up.

"Get Donnie in here," Raph suddenly cried out, his voice surprisingly strong and clear. "Dammit, it's just a cut."

"Raph?"

"Mikey?"

"Yeah, I'm right here. It's gonna be ok."

"You don't tell Leo nothin'," he said, and then started grumbling unintelligibly.

"I won't," I replied weakly, my stomach sick with fear. He was getting delirious, not knowing where he was anymore.

"Don, come on!" Raph shouted.

"It's ok, relax, Raph," I said desperately. "Don isn't here right now."

"Go drag him out of that damn lab!"

"Uh, I can't, Raph. We're not at home." I finished off in a miserable whisper, "I'm sorry, bro."

"Then where the fuck's the lair? What the –"

He broke off, his breathing suddenly turning into deep, rapid gasps. I watched in horror as he seemed to struggle for oxygen, sweat pouring off his face.

"Tully!" I called out. "Tully! Someone! *Tully!"*

Tully appeared in the doorway, took in Raph's condition and went over to him.

"He's not doing good. He needs help," I said. *"Now."*

"The master and mistress are coming," he said without bothering to look at me. He felt at Raph's neck for a pulse. "Thready," he muttered to himself.

"When?" I demanded. "Five minutes? An hour?"

"He don't have an hour."

" *When will they be here?"*

Tully strode quickly from the hold without answering me. I stared helplessly at my brother struggling for the last bit of his life. The terrifying realization began to creep over me that we were too late, and Raph would probably really die. I don't know how much more time passed - I was pretty much out of my mind at that point – before Captain Lawler came into the hold with a man I'd never seen before.

"That one, Master Eamon," he said, pointing at Raph.

A woman pushed past the two men, her eyes fixed on Raph. I'm not sure why, seeing as how I was in no condition to really take in

anything, but my first glimpse of her branded itself into my mind like photograph permanently fixed in front of my memory. She was sort of regal looking, with an attractive, aristocratic face and dark hair coiled in intricate braids around her head. This princess ran over to Raph, knelt down with no apparent concern about the blood and filth getting on her expensive looking clothes, and laid her hands on him. He went still, and neither of them moved for a long time.

The Lady Lyris

The power of empathy has many uses in sorcery. First of all, of course, it is essential for healing, and if the injury is grave enough, if death is imminent, a healer must touch the very soul itself and, if the healer is powerful enough, prevent it from departing the body. I never made a formal study of healing, but in the course of my pleasures I have experimented a good deal with repairing a damaged body. I have, rather ironically, become quite adept in the art of healing.

Some sorcerers fail to develop their empathic powers, leaving such things to the mere healers, thinking they have little use outside of healing. But consider, if touching the body in various ways can affect the mind, the emotions, the will and soul of a being, then how much more powerful an affect will it have to touch those things directly, and own them? I believe that healers long ago discovered the potential for the utter power over another that lies in empathy, and therefore established the healers' tradition of taking an oath to harm no living thing. Afraid of their own power that is their birthright, they seek to limit themselves.

I have never sought to limit myself.

I dove now, swift and deep, to capture the soul of the creature under my hands.

I have touched many souls in my time as I practiced my art. But I have never in my life encountered anything like this one. How can one describe the touch of another soul? Human language cannot encompass it. It is like trying to describe the moment of sexual

orgasm, or the ecstasy of sorcery channeled through the body, guided by the mind and held steadfast by the will. Words can offer only a poor approximation, none of them quite hitting the mark. Certainly words were all the more inadequate for a soul as extraordinary as his.

His soul was a darkness deeper than any shadow or night. A darkness vast and absolute, though very much alive and aware, and possessing a dangerous potency that could make even a person like me nearly tremble in apprehension. I caught it in my hands even as I dove through it, surrounded by the weighty, living darkness. I drove on and on until I came at last to the very center of his spirit. And there – *oh, there* – fire. Indomitable, everlasting, searing fire in the core of the black dark night. He was both these things, endless darkness and endless fire; both on them vital and ferocious, both willing and able to utterly destroy, and both able, when they chose, to give warmth and solace, if only one could endure its terrible, overwhelming energy. It was a soul so powerful it threatened to consume the being it inhabited.

By the gods, I thought, I made a bargain in the purchase of this one! By all the gods, he was worth fifty times what I paid! This one could be more than just a diverting pleasure. He could be more of a companion, almost an equal. I could hardly wait to begin our play, to pit myself against him. An excitement that I had not felt in years stormed through me. What would it take to break a being like this? How far could I take him? More interestingly, how far could he take me? My own soul thrilled with the possibilities.

But first, the healing. Now that I had grasped his spirit and anchored it to the flesh, it was time to repair the body. Knitting the lacerated muscle and sinew was not terribly difficult. It was merely a matter of fusing the parts back together. Regenerating all the blood he had lost was a greater challenge, requiring more effort and concentration on my part and more energy from both of us. I drew hungrily on his spirit, channeling his energy along with my own back into the

damaged body. We would both need a lengthy sleep when this was done. The effort would drain us both.

I have found most souls to be rather passive things. They usually lie inert in my power when I clutch them and hold them to the earth, impassive when I suck their energy into myself. It is almost as if the souls themselves are unconscious, if such a thing is possible. Perhaps fear and despair over the prospect of dying leave them languid and weak, the way prey animals will often cease struggling under the predator even though death has not yet claimed them.

It came as no surprise when this particular soul proved not to be passive in my hands, and I had already perceived that it feared very little. Yet still, I was startled to suddenly find a very alert sentience confronting me. There aren't words in the communion of souls, but there is language of a sort, instantaneous and more complete than mere words can allow. Roughly translated into inadequate human language, his soul demanded, *"Who the hell are you?"*

And without words I responded, *"Be still, I'm here to help you. I'm healing you."* I subtly leaned my will on him in the form of offering comfort and urging his trust, quietly compelling him to accept me. It worked well; he did not again question my presence. Empathic sorcery does indeed have its uses. I turned my focus back to finishing my work on his body.

He in turn seemed interested in exploring me while I worked. He quickly noted that my own being was a female to his male. I then felt his presence brush alongside mine and curl around me in a touch so unexpected and so frankly sensual that I nearly lost my concentration altogether. I have never had my soul felt up before. The sheer audacity of it might have amused me, but I could never allow a creature of my possession take such gross liberties. It was best that he start learning immediately my power and his limits. I did not bother with subtlety this time. I forced my will on him hard through the connection, compelling him to stillness. *"You will move when I allow it, and not sooner."*

If he had failed to notice the exertion of my will on him before, he certainly noticed it now. His reaction was immediate, explosive defiance and outrage. His own will was strong, and he actually made a commendable effort to break my hold. But as strong as he was, he was no sorcerer, and the connection of souls, the manipulation of empathy, the compulsion of will, all this was my playground. I held him immobile and silent while he could do nothing but simmer in mute, helpless fury.

The need to focus on several things at once was beginning to take its toll on me. Though I was still more than capable, I was beginning to get a bit tired, and I completed the healing as quickly as possible. Yet when it was finished, I still lingered a while before severing the connection, just to further prove to him my absolute control. He would come to understand in time.

He was going to have me inside him for as long as I pleased whether he willed it or not.

Master Eamon

Chapter 4 – Master Eamon

Newlin's Point of View

She stroked his prone body as one would stroke a dog.

Finished with the healing, the Lady Lyris now sat curled up beside the turtle creature as if she were sitting by the fire with a favorite pet. She ran her hands caressingly over the back of his head, across his shoulders, and down his sides, where his wounds had been healed without leaving the smallest scar behind. Only the blood drying on his body and congealing in puddles on the floor offered evidence that he had been injured nearly to his death only hours before. She used the sleeve of her own gown to wipe the blood from his mouth and chin – the blood there not his own but spilled from the torn throat of one of our tormenters. Her already ruined garments were not going to be any worse off from the gesture. And in any case, the gods only knew that a bit of blood on her clothes is not going to bother the likes of Lyris. After some minutes of stroking and caressing, she raised her stained hands before her eyes, working the blood between her fingers.

"You seem pleased with him," remarked our other master. Standing beside Captain Lawler a few feet away, Eamon watched her with a small smile on her face.

"More than pleased," Lyris murmured, still playing with the blood on her hands. She turned to Lawler after a moment. "Captain," she said, "I have a question for you."

"Yes, mistress." Although her tone had been mild, he visibly steeled himself.

"You are aware of how much I paid for this creature?"

"Yes, mistress," he replied with the resigned air of a man who could clearly see the approaching storm, but was caught in the middle of nowhere and knew he could do nothing but ride it out.

"Ah. Then are you unhappy with your own wages? Do I not compensate you generously for the tasks I ask of you?"

"I am well compensated, mistress."

"Is the work too difficult for you the manage?"

"No, mistress, but in this case-"

"Then tell me why, Captain, I should have to board my own ship and repair my *own damn property* with my own hands after I entrusted its care to *you* ?"

"You shouldn't, of course, but-"

"He arrived in terrible condition!"

"It couldn't be helped, mistress!" Despite himself, a note of irritation began to creep into his voice. Patience and subservience do not sit comfortably for long on a man like Lawler. "Some of the crew got too close to the creature-"

"Who?" Lyris interrupted. "Who is responsible for its injuries?"

"Crewman Vale. But the creature had another crewman by the throat. It *killed* him, mistress. Vale was only trying to save his life."

"Vale." Lyris considered the name a moment. "I'll have him keel hauled," she said, in the same manner she might have said she'll have toast for breakfast.

"Mistress," Lawler began to protest. "I'm already short one crewman. I don't-"

"Then you can hire two new crewmen, hopefully ones possessing enough wits not to get themselves killed by a bound and helpless creature! Leave us now, captain."

But Lawler did not immediately leave. He stood still, meeting Lyris's gaze while anger and better judgment apparently held a bout for supremacy in his mind.

"You and your crew made a disaster of this business, Lawler," she said. "You have much to atone for. Do *not* try my patience." Better judgment won out in the last seconds, and Lawler said no more. He sketched a curt bow to the master and mistress and left the hold.

Giving the turtle a final caress, Lyris rose to her feet. "I'm going to call him Khole," she said to Eamon, her eyes shining excitedly. "After the great fire at the core of the earth."

"Uh, his name is Raphael," the other turtle spoke up. "Is he gonna be ok?" Mike, his brother had called him, or Mikey. And Raphael. I marked their names. No one would call them by their real names again except perhaps each other, and me. I would work to remember them just as I worked to remember my own. It was my own feeble gesture of defiance to my masters. My own way of reminding myself that I was still a civilized being, and a gentleman. Stripped of everything else, I would not let us be stripped of our names.

"This one is mine, then," said Eamon, nudging Mike's thigh with the toe of his boot. He gave no sign that he had heard Mike speak.

"Ow!" he cried. "Hey! Watch the merchandize! I'm expensive, remember?"

Eamon paused, regarding Mike a moment. Then he slowly, thoughtfully drew back his foot and delivered a forceful kick to his side. "You will not speak unless bidden to speak," he said without expression.

Surprisingly to me, Mike reacted less to this than he had to the nudge from Eamon's toe. He took the blow stoically, merely grunting a little in startled pain. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Eamon much more warily than he had a moment before, yet still with no show of fear. "Look, I get it," he said. "We're your prisoners. Resistance is futile and all that. Fine. Just tell me if my brother's all right." He turned his gaze to Lyris as if hoping to find her more responsive. But she turned away, uninterested.

I have always maintained that Master Eamon is himself quite mad. Not raving mad, perhaps. Not incapable of functioning, but deranged. In polite circles, with his worst depravities hidden but his peculiar mannerisms on display, he would have been called 'a bit odd' or 'eccentric'. He comported himself with a strange, flat, expressionless manner, and almost always with a curious delay in his response to others, whether in conversation or action. It was as if ordinary human reactions did not come naturally to him, as if he were missing some vital component of understanding that other people instinctively possess. While not slow of intellect, he had to process information like some entirely other creature playing the part of a human, and in the end could only offer approximations of natural human responses. He always seemed to me an alien lost in a foreign country among his fellow people.

I have never been able to discern if Eamon ever felt any pleasure when he inflicted pain in others, or indeed if he ever felt any emotion at all. Yet for some reason pain utterly fascinated him. Under most circumstances, his derangement would have made him a prime candidate to be a captive on a ship of fools rather than its master. But Eamon was wealthy and nobly born, and most importantly wielded the power of a sorcerer. He could get away with it.

I remember once, when I was above deck to take in some air as I am occasionally allowed, I witnessed Eamon take a wounded gull and methodically pluck the bird clean while it was still alive. He held its body motionless with his power as he worked but left its head and neck free. Eamon slowly and deliberately tore out handfuls of

feathers as the bird's head screamed and struggled. I saw no gratification or excitement in Eamon as he did this, though he did watch the gull intently, even stooping low to study its flailing, crying head from a few inches away. The gull eventually became completely still, its beak gaping and panting, alive but no longer reacting as shock and pain finally overcame the poor creature. Eamon stood and wandered off, no longer interested enough to even dispose of his experiment.

This then is our master. And our mistress is truly no better, though her own madness and cruelty take on a different, subtler shape.

And now Mike was again looking Eamon in the eye, insisting on an answer about his brother, so ignorant and innocent in his confidence, his defiance. I feared for him more then he yet knew to fear for himself. *Be silent,* I wanted to tell him. *I'll explain it all later. Yes Raphael is all right. Just be still.*

"You have not eaten." Eamon cut Mike off in mid sentence and slid his gaze to the dried meat and bread on the floor beside him. Mike's mouth hung open a moment, his expression a mixture of bewilderment and frustration at being so thoroughly ignored.

"Thought I'd save room for desert," he replied caustically.

"You need to eat that," said the master.

"Okay, tell me what she did to my brother and I'll eat it." There was a pause while Eamon stared at him as if he had not heard, or at least not heard anything worth responding to. Mike began again, frustration and growing anger plain in his voice. "What's the big deal? God! Just tell me what-" He abruptly stopped speaking, letting out a startled cry, and started struggling against something I could not see. He began to slowly bend over from his knees. The cords on his neck and his shoulder muscles bulged as if resisting against the pressure of a powerful hand which had seized the back of his head and was forcing him down. With his hands bound behind him, there was little he could do to counter it.

"Now," said Eamon. "Eat it." Without so much as twitching a finger, Eamon's power relentlessly pushed Mike face first into the meager pile of food on the floor while he clamped his jaw shut and resisted. After a moment, he could not have eaten it even if he had been willing to comply. He was soon scarcely able to breathe. Muffled grunts emanated from him as the downward pressure mounted until he began to be smothered.

My deformities have left my health frail and I have never been able to perform feats of physical heroics. But I have never considered myself to be a moral coward. Once more the urge to speak prodded at me while tension crept up my spine. Words rolled about in my mind and sat poised just at the edge of my lips. Just a few words to interrupt this scene, to hopefully distract the master. It was such a small thing, really - hardly a grand heroic gesture. Just a few words that might spare Mike some pain. *I say, master…master, stop… master, please…*

But speaking would mean drawing attention to myself, and we had all learned long ago to avoid the masters' attention as best we can. Even Fluke in the far corner had ceased his endless self-stimulation and self-befouling when the masters had entered the hold. I found I could not force myself to speak. Habits born long ago through fear proved stronger then the urge to help a stranger. I silently berated myself. I reminded myself – as I so often did – that I, too, was nobly born, and unlike my captors, raised to be honorable and a gentleman.

And in the end I surrendered to my own cowardice. I told myself that nothing I could say would really distract Eamon or help Mike; it would probably only cause Eamon to increase his torment. The excuse rang hollow in my head. I took comfort in it anyway. Even worse was the realization that these exotic turtle beings, both plainly strong and spirited, would almost certainly command the bulk masters' attention for quite a while and thus ease the burden for the rest of us. It was a horrible thought, unworthy of me, and I burned with shame. But just

as strong came a sense of sneaky, greedy relief. For as long as the turtles lasted, the masters would have little interest in me.

It was Lyris, of all people, who put and end to Eamon's torments.

"Oh, leave him for now," she said impatiently. "I'm tired, and I want to wash."

"So go wash," returned Eamon after a pause, still watching Mike struggle for breath.

"Do you want to break him before we even leave port?" Her tongue clicked once, derisively, against the roof of her mouth. "You always did ruin your toys as soon as you received them. You're still like a child."

"I paid for him," Eamon said, a trace of something like emotion creeping into his voice. It only served to make him indeed sound like a rather petulant child. "I can do what I want with my things, Lyris."

"If you break him too fast I won't help you heal him. I'm not wasting my energy." She then changed tactics, her manner turning cajoling. "Come, Eamon, let him be for now. We have too much to do. Once we set sail, you'll have months with him."

Eamon capitulated after a moment, releasing Mike from his grip. Mike turned his head to the side where he lay, gasping.

"After all," Lyris continued as she and Eamon left the hold together, "the anticipation of pleasure is a pleasure in itself…"

Mike struggled to his knees, his face raw from being ground into the rough floor. Though I was too far from him to see, I was sure he must have had splinters embedded under his skin. "What the hell," he muttered.

"Mike," I said, and he turned his stunned, pained eyes to me. "Your brother, he's going to be all right…" I began to explain to him about

sorcerous healing and its effects, seeking for words of comfort, while in my heart I felt I had somehow betrayed them both.

The Want of a Nail

Chapter 5 – The Want of a Nail

Raphael

Again with the weird dreams.

I had enemies reaching into the deepest parts of me that no one – not anyone who had ever tried to hurt me, or anyone who would claim that they loved me – had ever seen and doing whatever the hell they wanted. They tore out great dark chunks of me and exposed them all to the glaring sun. And Mikey was pointing at it all and laughing hysterically, but I was worried about him because his eyes were wide open and streaming and terrified. I tried to tell him he needed a check-up but Donnie was busy helping the cow escape out the window. I knew I had to get up and get Mikey out the window too before his laughing woke up Splinter, but I couldn't move. And beyond that, I was worried that all this was gonna look bad at my job review and I was probably gonna get fired.

At least this time when I woke up I didn't feel sick. I felt fine. In fact, I felt so strong and energized that for about two seconds I forgot the dream and the trouble me and Mike were in. Those were a good two seconds. Then I went to leap out of bed (as opposed to my usual lurch out of bed - I ain't exactly a morning person) and reality gave me a good smackdown. Hands and feet chained and my face down on a rough wooden floor. I remembered all at once where I was.

Ah, fuck.

"Raph! You're up!"

That was from Mikey. I hate when people stupidly state the obvious. I didn't bother to reply as I got myself up to my knees.

"How you feeling? You okay?"

"I'm fine." I shrugged my shoulders and moved my body around a little, but I couldn't even feel where the wounds had been. "Doesn't even hurt."

"Damn, bro, you came close," Mike went on, his words pouring out in a rush of relief. "I really thought, you know, this is it."

"Well, I'm okay now."

Mikey never did know when to quit. "Right at the end there, before that sorcerer came and put her hands on you-"

" *Shut it, Mike!"* Goddamn, I didn't need to be reminded of that. The second he said it I could feel her crawling inside me again. "I said I'm fine!"

"Okay, okay!" he backed off, but he sounded hurt. " Jeez, bite my head off, why don't you? I'll remember not to be glad you're alive next time. I'll be like, 'Aw, damn, Raph's alive. That blows. I had dibs on all his porn'"

"Alright," I said, "I didn't mean to snap at ya."

"You know you really had me scared for a while, there."

"I know, I'm sorry." And I actually was a little. It must have hard on him, if I really had been that close to dead. I know if it had been the other way around, I probably would have gone out of my fucking mind.

"I was just about shitting myself."

"Heh, glad you didn't." I made myself smirk and motioned with my chin to the guy in the corner. "We don't need two people down here doing it."

That worked to snap him out of his funk a little. He grinned back at me. "Yeah, that guy adds enough to the atmosphere."

"Fluke." Newlin said helpfully. "They call him Fluke."

I looked at him blankly for a moment. And I was supposed to care, why? I turned back to Mike. "So how long I been out?"

"About a full day since you were stabbed," Newlin supplied. "And nearly a full day again since the Lady Lyris healed you. You're probably quite hungry."

"Starving, as a matter of fact. Don't they feed us in this hole?"

"Oh, yeah," Mike said. "We get the finest gourmet concrete bread and dried mystery meat. Your guess is as good as theirs."

"I don't even care. I could eat leather right now."

"And gruel, too!" Mike added. "They call it soup but they're not fooling me. I know it's gotta be that gruel shit."

"They should come to feed us shortly," Newlin put in. "It's about the time they usually give us breakfast."

"Alright then," I said, "we gotta come up with a plan. Mike, you been topside yet?"

He shook his head. "I haven't left this room. Two of them come down three times a day to feed us. They don't unchain me, they don't let us out. That's about it. We even gotta pee and shit these in little buckets. You got one behind you, too. Try doing that in shackles. It's a whole new skill set." He glanced over at Fluke's little section of filth. "Of course, some of us don't even bother."

I took a look around the room, trying to size up the others. There were seven of us all together, but we could pretty much write off Fluke and Finch the naked chick. "What about the rest of these guys?"

"Uh, they all seem pretty cracked," Mike answered, "except for Newlin. I don't think they'd be much help."

"Just you and me, then. Luck's running true to form."

"But on the bright side, I found a nail," he said hopefully.

"A nail?"

"Yeah, there's one right here that wasn't flush with the floor. I've been picking at it all yesterday and last night. I'm thinking I might be able to pick the locks if I can get it out."

I looked at the nails in the floorboards around me. The heads were almost half and inch across, which meant the nails themselves had to be pretty thick. "I dunno, Mike," I said. "These look big to me."

"Yeah, but this one's not that big. It's like, just some stray odd nail that got pounded into the floor. I got my fingers around the head right now. It's small."

"Worth a shot," I said. "We can't do nothin' till we're out of these chains, anyway."

"Look around where you are. Maybe there's a bunch of these scattered around."

I scanned the floor while Mike kept working at the nail he found. Newlin watched us silently. Around us, the rest of the freaks started to get a little livelier. Fluke talked to himself, but what the hell he was talking about, only he knew. "In the brackish water. I'm in the brackwater. All over all over…" Finch took up with the moaning again - a soft, constant, bloody irritating sound. Moan for four point five seconds, pause, moan for four point five seconds, pause, moan for four point five…Man, I had to get out of there.

"So the sorcerers," Mike said as he dug at the nail. "There's two of them, man and a woman. They're gonna be the most dangerous. We'd have to take them by surprise. They can grab hold of our bodies and jerk us around like puppets. Who knows what the hell else they can do."

I turned to the guy most likely to have info. "Hey, Newlin, what about these sorcerers? What can you tell me? What's the extent of their powers?"

"They can…" He hesitated. "Well, practically anything."

"That don't tell me anything. What *exactly* can they do?"

"Well, wait, first off, you need to know – you've just been healed through sorcery, and –"

"Fine, I don't care."

"You'll care," he said huffily, "when you get yourself into another violent confrontation, as it seems you're planning, and fall dead asleep in the middle of it."

Now that little tidbit of news took me aback a little. "What the hell you talking about?"

"It's an after effect of healing." Newlin explained. "You probably feel quite strong right now, but you're not fully recovered yet. Healing draws a lot of energy from the one being healed. For some time after, you'll be feeling perfectly well and energetic one moment, and then you'll suddenly be overcome with exhaustion. It won't matter what you're doing, you won't be able to resist falling asleep and sleeping for hours. It happens to everyone."

"Alright, alright." I said. "So how long am I gonna be like this?"

"It depends. On the person. On the extent of the injury. I can't –"

"Just give me a guess!"

"Maybe a week or so."

I had to snort at that. "I ain't waiting a week to bust out of here."

"I don't see where you have a choice. Frankly, I don't think you realize what you're up against. No offense intended."

"Yeah? And I don't think you know shit from a shingle. No offense intended."

"It's just," Newlin continued, "you think you're going to somehow pick your locks with a nail and then somehow defeat two sorcerers, not to mention a ship full of men. It's – it's just folly."

I really hate when people just go belly up when they're in trouble. Newlin was starting to push all the wrong buttons in me. "So – then what? What the hell are we supposed to –"

"Don't sweat it, Newlin" Mike jumped in, interrupting before I got a chance to really go off. "We've been up against sorcerers before. We handled it just fine."

"But not sorcerers from this world." Newlin protested. " *This* is First Earth. The very heart and wellspring of magic." There it was again, that superior tone as if he thought he was in the middle of the greatest show on earth, no matter how miserable this world had made his life. Incredible.

"Jesus, you know what?" I said. "You're fucked up. You sound like you're *proud* to have those assholes chaining you up in here like some freak."

"No, I'm not proud. I'm just aware that you're being incredibly foolish and naive."

"And you're a deformed pussy freak loser afraid to-"

"I got it!" Mike shouted, snapping our attention to him. He looked from me to Newlin and back to me. "The nail, I mean."

"Alright!" I shouted back. "Good job."

"Heh, go me." He turned himself around so I could see his chained hands behind his back.

"Help me out, Raph, where's the lock?"

"There's a keyhole right in the manacle," I told him, "on the left side of your wrist."

He twisted his hands around as far as his restraints would allow and prodded at the manacle with the tip of the nail. "How close am I?"

"Up a little."

He strained his hands a little more and found the keyhole, just barely able to work the nail with the tips of fingers. "Alright, it goes in," he said. "Now let's see what I can do. Kind of an awkward angle."

In the far corner, Fluke suddenly turned up the decibels on the conversation he was having with himself. "Can't see me I'm covered! Put this on and I'm up like the moon! Oh yes..." Not to be outdone, Finch started moaning louder.

"I did it, you know," the guy on the other side of Newlin piped up. Like everyone except Mike and me, he was restrained only with a single manacle around his leg with the chain bolted to the floor. He crawled out now as far as the chain would allow and began talking to me. "This is all my doing. I dreamed of you coming and I brought you here."

"Ignore him," Newlin said. "He thinks he's a mad sorcerer-king who died a thousand years ago."

"Not *mad* , Newlin," the mad sorcerer-king guy corrected irritably. Then he winked at me. "I'm just trying to help you out, lad.

"Fascinatin'," I said. "Who cares?"

"Personally," Newlin announced to no one in particular. "I believe he knows quite well he's not Durriken Lon. His particular insanity lies in

that he refuses to give up the act, even though it's brought him to this."

"Oh, I am Durriken Lon," said mad sorcerer-king guy. "I am the power behind this ship. I envisioned it all. It's all planned."

Newlin rolled his one visible eye. "If you are really Durriken Lon then why don't you save yourself from this misery?"

"My time is not yet come. I await my time."

"Then I wish you'd tell your time to hurry it along so you can stop vexing me with your presence."

"Dammit." That came from Mike, still working at the keyhole. "I can't get it."

"It's alright, take your time," I told him.

"Hard to concentrate," he muttered. He let out a frustrated growl, jerking the nail around in the hole.

"Just try to block 'em out," I said as soothingly as I could. "Take it slow. You'll get it." I thought it was kind of funny, the hot tempered and impulsive trying to school the hyperactive and distractible in patience. Leo should see this.

"Oh yes you like that?" Fluke suddenly shouted. "Oh yes oh yes!" Sonaofabitch…now the guy was sitting there frantically whacking off in front of all of us. "Put it on me! Oh little pig put it on me!"

"You mock me, Newlin. *Polyp* ." Durriken Lon sneered, still harping on him. He sounded like he was trying for his best threatening crazed sorcerer voice, but falling some ways short. "If I choose, I can call demons from the vast depths-"

"Why, so can I," Newlin replied dryly. "So can this turtle here. It doesn't mean they'll come when we call them."

"You wait. Just keep chattering, Newlin. I'll see you regret it when my time comes."

"Oh, I'm quaking with fear."

" *I'll see you dead!"* the mad sorcerer-king shrieked. *"I'll see you begging me!"*

Mike looked at over me and grinned wearily. "I'm starting to like that one guy who doesn't say anything."

"Will you all," I said, "SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Surprisingly enough, it worked. The din turned itself off as if someone has flicked a switch. All except for Finch, who jumped from automatic moaning to genuine cries of panic. I don't know my own strength sometimes.

"Ahhhh! Ahhhh! Ahhhh!"

Mike took her into his own hands. "Finch. Hey, Finch," he said gently. "Look up a minute. Look at me." He kept talking quietly, and gradually her cries lowered in volume to a soft whine and she dragged her eyes to him. Maybe I scared the hell out of Finch, but nobody could be scared of Mikey, at least not when he's working his wide-eyed and sincere act. "Don't be scared, okay?" he said. "It's just bonehead Raph blowing off some steam. But I need you to quiet down a little for me, okay? Think you can be good and do that?"

She considered him in silence for a moment, then went, "Brrrrrrrr," vibrating her lips together. She curled up on her ratty blanket and continued making weird little noises at herself - little blips and chirps, every now and then throwing in some sounds I could almost make out as words. Mike and I just watched her a minute – not that we were all shocked and bothered by any of it, we've seen too many crazy people on the streets back home for that, but it was just so freaking – odd.

"Beats the moaning, anyway," Mikey eventually said, shrugging.

"Hey, I ain't complaining," I replied.

Right then the door to the hold flew open. "Okay, freakies, show time! You got people waitin' to see you!" Some of the crew came in – a bunch of men, and one woman. Even though I'd never laid eyes on her before, I knew exactly who it was. I'd know her anywhere. If I had been blind and deaf, I still would have been able to feel her presence. I'd felt her inside me, felt her deliberately force her way in deeper when I'd wanted her out. I even knew her name, though I'd never heard it spoken. Lyris – my newest and definitely my permanent enemy. While the men went about unlocking everyone's chains from the floor, she smiled at me – a full on, warm smile like we were some kind of goddamn lovers sharing a secret.

"Not him," she said when one of the men came to unlock my chain.

"Really, Lyris," said another guy, not one of the crew from the expensive looking clothes and the familiar, exasperated tone he used with Lyris. I guessed he had to be the other sorcerer. I glanced at Mikey who confirmed it, gesturing with his head and mouthing "sorcerer".

"He's mine, Eamon, and I don't want him exposed to that," she said, he voice measured and patronizing, like she was talking to a slow child. "Showing yours is more than enough." She gave me another one of those secretive smiles. "I'll see you again soon enough, alone." With that, she swept out of the hold.

"How come you always get all the broads?" Mike asked me, making a good effort at cockiness. I could tell he was trying to act more nonchalant about whatever the hell they were up to than he really felt, for my sake.

And for his sake, I didn't let on how worried I really was. "Hey, when you got it, you got it."

The crew started leading – more like dragging – the other freaks out of the hold. "But I haven't even breakfasted yet." The guy who thought he was Durriken Lon complained as he was hauled out.

"Don't worry, my lord," the crewman leading him said. "You'll get plenty of eats when the show's over."

"Come on, Polyp," said another crewman to Newlin. The guy had to let Newlin lean on him as he shuffled slowly, and it looked to me painfully, along. It was the first time I'd seen him try to move, and I realized that Newlin's deformities must have put him in a lot of physical pain. "You remember to keep your mouth shut, right?" the crewman said as they passed me. His tone was menacing under a fake friendly veneer. "Remember what happened last time? You remember that, right?"

When they unlocked Mike's chain from its ring in the floor, the sorcerer ordered, "Keep his feet bound. I'll bring him." Eamon raised his hand, and Mike's body slowly rose from the floor and hovered in mid air. I saw his hands balled into fists as if resisting, and I knew he was hiding that nail in one of them. They left the hold with Mike floating ahead of them, leaving me alone there.

I couldn't see anything through the open hatch above me except sky and the ship's rigging, but the noises from on deck were carrying down to me pretty clearly. I spent my time scanning the floor for another loose nail or anything to pick my locks with, and trying to follow what was happening overhead by sound.

After a few minutes I heard the voices and footsteps of a lot of people milling around on deck, and the voices of the crew showing off the freaks for them. Finch had dropped the weird chirping and was back to moaning, loudly. The Durriken Lan guy was winging back and forth from sniveling to grandiose proclamations and threats. Whatever Fluke was saying and making noise about made no goddamn sense in any language, and I didn't want to guess what he was probably doing to himself up there. I couldn't make out Mike's voice anywhere.

A woman screamed - the kind of scream a woman makes when she's more amused than scared. "Oh, how horrid!" Laughter. More snatches of conversations. "Not sorcery, sir, born a monster…she don't know, doesn't even care…is he dangerous?…mind's completely gone…no more than an animal now…never learned to speak…nope, brain's complete rot and poison…you, you there, CAN YOU UNDERSTAND ME?…look, you can do anything…I've seen enough…not in front of my wife…later, when the ladies leave, you can…"

There was a collective gasp and a bunch of shouts along the lines of "Oh my god!" Apparently they'd been holding Mike back to make a grand entrance. All the voices converged to one spot overhead. "What is it?"

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is a creature from Second Earth, a world where animals walk and talk like men. After a quest of great peril and hardship we returned triumphant with this creature, and this ship is the only place in this world where you can behold such a marvel."

"So it's intelligent?" "Make it talk." "Is it male or female?" "Male obviously." "Nothing obvious about it!" Laughter. "Look at the muscle" "Must be male." " Not necessarily. Female animals have muscle, too." "Well, ma'am, you could find out for yourself what it's hiding, if you dare." Laughter. "Oh, I couldn't touch it! Berwin, darling, you do it." "As you wish" Dramatic sigh. "The things I do for my lady's love." More laughter.

Suddenly, the joking voices cut off and turned to screams, real screams of pain and fear from both men and women. The sounds of fighting broke out overhead, and of bodies dropping to the deck. Stampeding footsteps of people tripping over themselves to get clear. The crew shouted for Lawler. Lawler shouted for the master and mistress.

I started reflexively struggling against my chains, the tight manacles cutting into my skin as I jerked and twisted and pulled. Everything

held fast, but I couldn't stop myself. It goes against everything in me to have one of my brothers fighting for his life and not being in the middle of it myself. It was chaos above me. I couldn't tell where Mike was, or if he was winning. "Fuck this, fuck this, come on, Mikey," I snarled as I fought my own useless battle with those goddamn chains.

The door to the hold burst open and some of the crew poured in, dragging the freaks with them. They hauled them back to their spots and relocked the manacles to their ankles, throwing the captives to the floor any old way and all in a big hurry about it. Lawler and some more men came in next, carrying an unconscious Mikey, with Lyris right behind them, pushing her way into the room.

"Go! Go!" she shouted. "Lawler, weigh anchor!"

"And then what, Mistress?" he snapped. "We're docked in the middle of a crowded harbor. We're going nowhere fast, not unless you want to propel us to open water."

"Fine, then," she said impatiently. "I'll get us out. *You* see to it that this can't happen again, then join me on deck."

Lawler glanced up from locking Mike's chain to the ring in the floor. "Shall I cut off their fingers?"

Lyris paused a second, as if seriously thinking it over. "No, no," she said. "Just bind them for now. But hurry!"

"Tully," Lawler said to one of the men, "run and get me something to-
"

"Already on it, sir." The guy ran from the room.

I looked at Mike, trying to see how badly he was hurt. "What did you do to him, Lawler?" I demanded. "If you fucking hurt him, you're –"

"I'm what?" he cut me off. "As a matter of fact, I did 'fucking' hurt him, as you put it. What do you think you're going to do to me?"

"Come here and find out, you fucking coward."

He could move fast for such big guy. His foot connected with my plastron and knocked me backwards, and then he was kneeling his full weight on me, his hand gripping my throat and half strangling me. "So tell me what you think you're going to do to me," he said.

I bucked my body up as much as I could to get him the hell off me, and craned my head around, trying to reach any part of him I could with my teeth. Hey, a ninja uses any weapon available, and at that point my teeth were all I had. I could see glimpses of the crew behind him, grinning and thrilled to see their captain put me in my place. "Bite me and I'll knock every tooth out of your head," Lawler warned.

"Bring it, asshole!" I growled. I tried to lunge upward to get at his face, just to show I wasn't bluffing.

His hand tightened, cutting off my air completely. I didn't have any options left except to glare into his eyes with pure hatred and not give him the satisfaction of seeing anything else. He glared back at me, matching hate for hate. "Animal," he said, his voice grating over itself like stones grinding together. "Look at you, trying to pass yourself for a man while you foam at the mouth and bite like a rabid dog. *Animal* . My mistress enjoys her perversions but I don't share them. I'd see your whole foul race dead if I could."

"Captain." Tully's voice. Lawler didn't acknowledge him. "Sir," Tully tried again, more loudly. "I have sacks and twine." This time he got Lawler's attention. The captain released me, reluctantly, and went over to Mike. He took a small burlap sack from Tully and put it over both of Mike's hands, lashing it on tightly with the twine, wrapping his hands with it from his wrists to the tips of his fingers. They did the same to me, with Lawler rolling me onto my plastron and putting his foot on my neck like I was some damn trophy he just shot. He held

me down while the crew worked. When they were done my hands were wrapped like a mummy and completely immobile. Neither me nor Mike were gonna be picking any locks any time soon.

After they left the hold I noticed the ship was really moving at a good clip now and a strong wind was howling outside. Lyris, I thought, booking us out of here. I looked over at Newlin, lying face down on the floor, his breathing labored.

"Hey, Newlin," I said, "Talk to me. What's wrong with Mike?"

"He's unconscious," Newlin said through long gasping breaths, "but I don't think…badly hurt….You were worse."

"What the hell happened up there?"

He let out a weird, croaking chuckle. "I assume…he picked the damn lock…He took exception…to being handled…he had one arm free, and then…I've never seen…by all the gods…who are you people?"